

The Scaler

A Blazed Trail Story.

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE.

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ONCE Morrison and Daly of Saginaw, but then lumbering at Beeson lake, lent some money to a man named Crothers, taking in return a mortgage on what was known as the Crothers tract of white pine. In due time, as Crothers did not liquidate, the firm became possessed of this tract. They hardly knew what to do with it.

The timber was situated some fifty miles from the railroad in a country that threw all sorts of difficulties across the logger's path and had to be hauled from nine to fifteen miles to the river. Both Morrison and Daly groaned in spirit. Supplies would have to be toted in to last the entire winter, for when the snow came communication over fifty miles of forest road would be as good as cut off. Whom could they trust among the lesser foremen of their woods force? Whom could they spare among the greater?

At this juncture they called to them Tim Shearer, their walking boss and the greatest riverman in the state. "You'll have to 'jib' her," said Tim promptly.

"Who would be hired at any price to go up in that country on a ten mile haul?" demanded Daly skeptically.

"Jest one man," replied Tim, "an' I know where to find him."

He returned with an individual at the sight of whom the partners glanced toward each other in doubt and dismay. But there seemed no help for it. A contract was drawn up in which the firm agreed to pay \$6 a thousand, merchantable scale, for all saw logs banked at a railway to be situated a given number of miles from the forks of Cass branch, while on his side James Bourke, better known as the Rough Red, agreed to put in at least three and a half million feet. After the latter had scrawled his signature he lunched from the office, softly rubbing his hairy freckled hand where the pen had touched it.

"That means a crew of wild Irishmen," said Mr. rison.

"And that means they'll just slaughter the pine," added Daly. "They'll say high and crooked, they'll chuck the tops. Who are we going to send to scale for 'em?"

Morrison sighed. "I hate to do it; there's only Fitz can make it go."

So then they called to them another of their best men, named Fitz Patrick, and sent him away alone to protect the firm's interests in the depths of the wilderness.

The Rough Red was a big, broad faced man with eyes far apart and a bushy red beard. He wore a dingy mackinaw coat, a dingy black and white checked flannel shirt, dingy blue trousers tucked into high socks and lumberman's rubbers. The only spot of color in his costume was the flaming red sash of the voyageur which he passed twice around his waist. When at work his little wide eyes flickered with a baleful wicked light, his huge voice bellowed through the woods in a torrent of imprecations and commands, his splendid muscles swelled visibly even under his loose blanket coat as he wrenched suddenly and savagely at some man's stubborn cant-hook stock. A hint of reluctance or opposition brought his fist to the mark with irresistible impact. Then he would pluck his victim from the snow and kick him to work, with a savage jest that raised a laugh from everybody—excepting the object of it.

In the work was little system, but much efficacy. The men gambled, drank, fought, without a word of protest from their leader. With an ordinary crew such performances would have meant slight accomplishment, but these wild Irishmen with their blood-shot eyes, their ready jests, their equally ready fists plunged into the business of banking logs with all the abandon of a carouse—and the work was done.

Law in that wilderness was not, saving that which the Rough Red chose to administer. Except in one instance, penalty more severe than a beating there was none, for the men could not equal their leader in breaking the greater and lesser laws of morality. The one instance was that of young Barney Mallan, who, while drunk, mishandled a horse so severely as to lame it. Him the Rough Red called to formal account.

"Don't ye know that horses can't be had?" he demanded, singularly enough without an oath. "Come here."

The man approached. With a single powerful blow of a starting bar the Rough Red broke his tibia.

"Try th' lameness yerself," said the Rough Red grimly.

On Thanksgiving day the entire place went on a prolonged drunk. The Rough Red distinguished himself by rolling the round stove through the door into the snow. He was badly burned in accomplishing this delicate jest, but minded the smart no more than he did the admiring cheers of his maudlin but envious mates. Fitz Patrick extinguished a dozen little fires that the coals had started, shifted the intoxicated Mallan's leg out of the danger of some one's falling on it, and departed from that roaring hell hole to the fringe of the solemn forest. And this brings us to Fitz Patrick.

Fitz Patrick was a tall, slow man

with a face built square. The lines of his brows, his mouth and his jaw ran straight across; those of his temples, cheeks and nose straight up and down. His eye was very quiet and his speech rare. When he did talk it was with deliberation. For days sometimes he would ejaculate nothing but monosyllables, looking steadily on the things about him.

He had walked in ahead of the tote-team late one evening in the autumn after the Rough Red and his devils had been at work a fortnight. The camp consisted quite simply of three buildings, which might have been identified as a cook camp, a sleeping camp and a stable. Fitz Patrick entered the sleeping camp, stood his slender scaling rule in the corner and peered about him through the dusk of a single lamp.

He saw a round stove in the center, a littered and dirty floor, bunks filled



with horrible straw and worse blankets jumbled here and there, old and dirty clothes drying fetidly. He saw an unkempt row of hard faced men along the deacon seat, reckless in bearing, with the light of the devil in their eyes.

"Where is the boss?" asked Fitz Patrick steadily.

The Rough Red lurched his huge form toward the intruder.

"I am your scaler," explained the latter. "Where is the office?"

"You kin have the bunk beyond," indicated the Rough Red surlily.

"You have no office, then?"

"What's good enough fer th' men is good enough fer a boss, and what's good enough fer th' boss is good fer any blank blanked scaler."

"It is not good enough for this one," replied Fitz Patrick calmly. "I have no notion of sleepin' and workin' in no such noise an' dirt. I need an office to keep me books an' th' van. Not a log do I scale for ye, Jimmy Bourke, till yeze give me a fit place to tally in."

And so it came about, though the struggle lasted three days. The Rough Red stormed restlessly between the woods and the camp, delivering tremendous broadsides of oaths and threats. Fitz Patrick sat absolutely imperturbable on the deacon seat looking straight in front of him, his legs stretched comfortably aslant, one hand supporting the elbow of the other, which in turn held his short brier pipe. The cook, a thin faced, sly man, secretly admired him.

"Lurk out for th' Rough Red; he'll do ye!" he would whisper hoarsely when he passed the silent scaler.

But in the three days the Rough Red put his men to work on a little cabin. Fitz Patrick at once took his scaling rule from the corner and set out into the forest.

His business was, by measuring the diameter of each log, to ascertain and tabulate the number of board feet put in by the contractor. On the basis of his single report James Bourke would be paid for the season's work. Inevitably he at once became James Bourke's natural enemy, and so of every man in the crew, with the possible exception of the cook.

Suppose you log a knoll which your eye tells you must grow at least half a million; suppose you work conscientiously for twelve days; suppose your average has always been between 40,000 and 50,000 a day. And then suppose the scaler's sheets credit you with only a little over the 400,000! What would you think of it? Would you not be inclined to suspect that the scaler had cheated you in favor of his master—that you had been compelled by false figures to work a day or so for nothing?

Fitz Patrick scaled honestly, for he was a just man, but exactitude and optimism of estimate never have approximated, and they did not in this case. The Rough Red grumbled, accused, swore, threatened. Fitz Patrick smoked steadily and said nothing.

The two men early came to a clash over the methods of cutting. The Rough Red and his crew cut anywhere, everywhere, anyhow. The easiest way was theirs. Small timber they skipped, large timber they sawed high, tops they left rather than trim them into logs. Fitz Patrick would not have the pine "slaughtered."

Never would the Red acknowledge the wrong nor promise the improvement, but both were there, and both he and Fitz Patrick knew it. The Rough Red

chafed frightfully, but in a way his hands were tied. He could do nothing without the report, and it was too far out to send for another scaler, even if Daly would have given him one.

Finally in looking over a skidway he noticed that one log had not been blue pencilled across the end. That meant that it had not been scaled, and that in turn meant that he, the Rough Red, would not be paid for his labor in cutting and banking it. At once he began to bellow through the woods:

"Hey, Fitz Patrick! Come here, you blank, blanked, blank of a blank! Come here!"

The scaler swung leisurely down the travoy trail and fronted the other with level eyes.

"Well?" said he.

"Why ain't that log marked?"

"I culled it."

"Ain't it sound and good? Is there a mark on it? A streak of punk or rot? Ain't it good timber? What th' blank's th' matter with it? You tried to do me out of that, you blank skunk!"

A log is culled or thrown out when for any reason it will not make good timber.

"I'll tell you, Jimmy Bourke," replied Fitz Patrick calmly, "th' stick is sound and good or was before your murderin' crew got hold of it, but if ye'll take a squint at the butt of it ye'll see that your gang has sawed her on a six inch slant. They've wasted a good foot of th' log. I spoke of that afore, an' now I give ye warnin' that I cull every log, big or little, punk or sound, that ain't sawed square and true across th' butt."

"Th' log is sound an' good, an' ye'll scale it, or I'll know th' reason why!"

"I will not," replied Fitz Patrick.

The following day he culled a log in another and distant skidway whose butt showed a slant of a good six inches. The day following he culled another of the same sort on still another skidway. He examined it closely, then sought the Rough Red.

"It is useless, Jimmy Bourke," said he, "to be hauling of that same poor log from skidway to skidway. You can shift her to every travoy trail in th' Crothers tract, but it will do ye little good. I'll cull it wherever I find it, and never will ye get th' scale of that log."

The Rough Red raised his hand, then dropped it again, whirled away with a curse, whirled back with another and spat out:

"By —, Fitz Patrick, ye go too far! Ye've hounded me and harried me through th' woods all th' year! By — 'tis a good stick, an' ye shall scale it!"

"Ye' an' yo' old fellows is robbers alike!" cried one of the men.

Fitz Patrick turned on his heel and resumed his work. The men ceased theirs and began to talk.

That night was Christmas eve. After supper the Rough Red went directly from the cook camp to the men's camp. Fitz Patrick, sitting lonely in the little office, heard the sounds of debauch rising steadily like mysterious storm winds in distant pines. He shrugged his shoulders and tallied his day's scaling and turned into his bunk wearily, for of holidays there are none in the woods save Sunday. About midnight some one came in. Fitz Patrick, roused from his sleep by aimless blunderings, struck a light and saw the cook looking uncertainly toward him through blood clotted lashes. The man was partly drunk, partly hurt, but more frightened.

"Le' me stay," pleaded the man. "I won't bother you. I won't even make a noise. I'm skeered."

"Course you can stay," replied the scaler. "Come here."

He washed the man's forehead and bound up the cut with surgeon's plaster from the van. The man fell silent, looking at him in wonderment for such kindness.

Four hours later dimly through the mist of his broken sleep Fitz Patrick heard the crew depart for the woods in the early dawn. On the crest of some higher waves of consciousness were borne to him drunken shouts, maudlin blasphemies. After a time he arose and demanded breakfast.

The cook, pale and nervous, served him. The man was excited, irreligious, eager to speak. Finally he dropped down on the bench opposite Fitz Patrick and began:

"Fitz," said he, "don't go in the woods today. The men is fair wild wid the drink, and the Rough Red is beside h'lf. Las' night I heard them. They are goin' to skid the butt log again, and they swear that if you cull it again they will kill you."

Fitz Patrick swallowed his coffee in silence. In silence he arose and slipped on his mackinaw blanket coat. In silence he thrust his beechwood tablets into his pocket and picked his pliable scaler's rule from the corner.

"Where are ye goin'?" asked the cook anxiously.

"I'm goin' to do the work they pay me to do," answered Fitz Patrick.

He took his way down the trail, his face set straight before him, the smoke of his breath steaming behind. The first skidway he scaled with care, laying his rule flat across the face of each log, entering the figures on his many leaved tablets of beech, marking the timbers swiftly with his blue crayon.

The woods were empty. No ring of the ax, no shout of the driver, no fall of the tree broke the silence. Fitz Patrick comprehended. He knew that at the next skidway the men were gathered, waiting to see what he would do; gathered openly at last in that final hostility which had been maturing all winter. He knew, besides, that most of them were partly drunk and wholly reckless and that he was alone. Nevertheless, after finishing conscientiously skidway number one, he moved on to skidway number two.

There, as he had expected, the men were waiting in ominous silence.

Methodically, deliberately, he did his work. Then, when the last penny mark had been made and the table had been closed with a snap of finality the Rough Red stepped forward.

"Ye have finished with this way?" asked the foreman in soft tones.

"I have," answered Fitz Patrick briefly.

"Ye have forgot to scale one stick."

"No."

"There is a stick still not marked."

"I culled it."

"Why?"

"It was not sawed straight."

Fitz Patrick threw his head back proudly, answering his man at ease as an accomplished swordsmen. The Rough Red shifted his feet, almost averted in spite of himself. One after another the men dropped their eyes and stood still at ease. The scaler turned away, his heel caught a root; he stumbled; instantly the pack was on him, for the power of his eye was broken.

Mad with rage they kicked and beat and tore at Fitz Patrick's huddled form long after consciousness had left it. Then an owl hooted from the shadow of the wood, or a puff of wind swept by, or a fox barked, or some other little thing happened, so that in blind unreasoning panic they fled.

Fitz Patrick regained his wits in pain and so knew he was still on earth. Every movement cost him a man, and some agony outside himself inflicted added torture. After a long time he knew it was the cook, who was firmly but kindly kneading his limbs and knocking his hair. The man proved to be in a maze of wonderment over his patient's tenacity of life.

"I watched ye," he murmured soothingly. "I did not dare interfere. But I kin to ye' s soon as I could. See! Here's a fire that I built for ye and some tea. Take a little. And no bones broke! True for ye, ye're a hearty man and strong, with th' big muscles on ye fit to fight th' Rough Red man to man. Get th' use of ye're legs, darlint, an' I'll take ye to camp, for th' fair drunk they are by now. Sure, an' I tole ye they'd kill ye!"

"But they didn't," muttered Fitz Patrick, with a gleam of humor.

"Sure 'twas not their fault—nor yer own!"

Hours later as it seemed they moved slowly in the direction of camp. The cold had stiffened Fitz Patrick's cuts and bruises. Every step shot a red wave of torture through his brain. They came in sight of camp. It was silent. Both knew that the men had drunk themselves into a stupor.

"I'd like t' kill th' whole layout as she sleeps," snarled the cook, shaking his fist.

"So would I," replied Fitz Patrick.

Then as they looked a thin wreath of smoke curled from under the open doorway and spread lazily in the frosty air. Another followed, another, still another. The cabin was afire.

"They've kicked over the stove again," said Fitz Patrick, seating himself on a stump. His eyes blazed with wrath and bitterness.

"What ye' goin' to do?" asked the cook.

"Sit here," replied Fitz Patrick grimly.

The cook started forward.

"Stop!" shouted the scaler fiercely.

"If you move a step I'll break your back!"

The cook stared at him through saucer eyes.

"But they'd be burnt alive!" he objected wildly.

"They ought to be," snarled the scaler. "It ain't their fault I'm here to help them. 'Tis their own deed that I'm now lyin' beyant them in th' forest, unable to help myself. Do you understand? I'm yet out there in th' woods!"

"Ah, wirra, wirra!" wailed the cook, wringing his hands. "Th' poor lads!" He began to weep.

Fitz Patrick stared straight in front of him for a moment. Then he struck his forehead and with wonderful agility, considering the injuries he had but just received, tore down the hill in the direction of the smoldering cabin. The cook followed him joyfully. Together they put out the fire. The men snored like beasts, undisturbed by all the tumult.

"'Tis th' soft heart ye have, after all, Fitz," said the cook delightfully as the two washed their hands in preparation for a lunch. "Ye could not bear t' see th' lads burn."

Fitz Patrick glowered at him for an instant from beneath his square brows.

"They can go to hell for all of me," he answered finally, "but my people want these logs put in this winter, an' there's nobody else to put them in."

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